

## Pandemic Flu

Dead chickens. Global pandemics. Avian flu outbreaks. Vaccine shortages. In recent months, these topics have been a source of fear in the American public, as well as hotly debated discussion within the medical community. So, what do you need to know about pandemic and avian flu? Let's start with the facts.



According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a pandemic is a disease outbreak that occurs globally. In the case of a flu pandemic, a new influenza evolves, for which people have little or no immunity and no developed vaccine. The disease spreads easily among humans, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in a very short period of time. In 1918, for example, a global pandemic killed 50 million people across the world—more than three times the number of people killed in World War I.

While the public often inaccurately identifies pandemic flu as synonymous with avian flu, avian flu is simply one type of potential pandemic influenza. Avian flu is caused by naturally occurring flu viruses in birds, which are normally harmless to humans. What most people think of when they hear “avian flu” today is actually a new strain of virus, known as H5N1, which has killed wild birds from over 80 species and which spreads easily among poultry. Although there are no documented cases of avian flu in birds within the United States, in other parts of the world, particularly Asia, numerous birds have died and H5N1 has passed to humans causing severe illness and death. While the disease is known to have spread to humans who have come in direct contact with the diseased birds, it has not currently been transmitted between humans. The concern is that H5N1 will evolve into a virus capable of human-to-human transmission, which could quickly lead to a pandemic.

These important issues have encouraged many Americans to begin planning for the worst. Due to the global impact of a pandemic epidemic, the entire community must be involved in planning, training, and practicing for a response. The Department of Homeland Security's Citizen Corps brings community and government leaders together to involve all community members in all-hazards emergency preparedness, planning, mitigation, response, and recovery.

### **5 Steps You Can Take to Protect Against Pandemic Flu from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services:**

- 1) Individuals, businesses and communities should talk to their local public health officials and health care providers, who can supply information about the signs and symptoms of a specific disease outbreak and recommend prevention and control actions.
- 2) Adopt business and school practices that encourage sick employees or students to stay home and anticipate how to function with a significant portion of the workforce or school population absent due to illness or caring for ill family members.
- 3) As always, practice good health habits, including eating a balanced diet, exercising daily, and getting sufficient rest.
- 4) Take common-sense steps to stop the spread of germs, including frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes and staying away from others as much as possible when you are sick.
- 5) Stay informed about pandemic influenza and be prepared to respond appropriately and calmly. Consult [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) frequently for updates on national and international information on pandemic influenza.